

# Drought's drain: driving profit through supporting good mental health

*Letitia Cross & Camilla Herbig, Rural Adversity Mental Health Program*

## Key words

Farm profitability, mental health, stress management, decision-making

## Take home messages

- Even though consultants haven't traditionally seen discussions with growers about stress management and mental health as part of their role it actually makes good business sense
- The 'slow creep' of drought-related stress is detrimental to growers if unaddressed, but supporting growers to understand and manage their stress helps to prevent developing mental health problems, while also supporting future relationships and business outcomes
- Consultants are skilled to support grower's decision-making, and this becomes crucial in adverse times to assist them to understand the facts, their options and ways of making informed decisions
- Recognising mental health concerns for a grower, having conversations and seeking support ensures not only the grower's wellbeing, but as interlinked businesses it also ensures the long-term profitability and viability of both consultants and suppliers.
- Looking after ourselves is essential so as we can cope with day to day stresses and support our families, friends, business and communities.

## Background

Creating understanding and awareness of the importance of farmers actively looking after their mental health has not traditionally been a domain of the agriculture service industry. However, because of the co-reliance and linked economic fortunes it makes good business sense for consultants to consider the importance of having conversations with clients about proactively managing their stress and mental health during times of adversity.

Drought is particularly stressful due to the unpredictability and longevity of conditions. In spite of this, if clients are supported to consider their own stress management and mental upkeep as importantly as their equipment, rotational considerations or financial planning, they are positioned to not only survive drought but also to be mentally capable of capitalising on drought-breaking seasonal change. Additionally, this simple approach works to secure both financial and client longevity advantages for the consultant.

Droughts are a natural feature of the Australian environment. But unlike immediate disasters which feature a critical incident or rapid onset (fire, flood etc.), drought has been described as a 'creeping disaster'. This is because by the time a drought is identified, it is usually already well established, with mounting costs, and the opportunity to take proactive action has already been missed (Austin et al., 2018). The unpredictability and longevity of drought results in a cumulative effect, the 'slow creep', where stress which is held for long and unknown periods of time which makes it particularly detrimental. Left unaddressed this continually held stress is associated with negative personal, social, physical health and mental health consequences across time.

## Taking action

Consultants, agronomists and broader agriculture service personnel have naturally been focussed on providing advice on the technical or product component of the farming business. There has also been a concern of consultants about overstepping social and personal boundaries to start conversations when living and working in interconnected small communities. However, genuine

concern and open discussion is key to overcoming stigma around mental health, empowering people in rural communities to proactively identify, manage and seek help when required.

As consultants and agricultural support services are embedded in rural businesses they are uniquely positioned as independent and reliable sources of advice to support growers and rural communities during adverse times. A particularly important but often overlooked part of this advice is providing mental health and well-being support through general conversation and social connection. Having conversations which encourage clients to manage stress and maintain their mental health not only ensures growers continued productivity through capacity to operate, but as businesses are financially co-dependant it also preserves consultants own long-term profitability and viability.

Consultants with some knowledge and training can be a key contributor to identifying early signs of drought-related stress, through conversations to reduce stigma and encourage help seeking. This can be done in four simple ways:

1. Encourage stress management
2. Support good decision-making
3. Notice changes in clients, have the conversation and encourage help
4. Look after yourself, so you can continue to support others

## **1. Stress management**

Stress is a normal reaction which everyone feels, as it is the physical and emotional response to having demands made upon us. However, the increasing load we carry and how we manage our stress has implications for our mental health, risk of developing an illness, decision-making and consequently operating a successful business.

Practicing stress management techniques in good times and in bad times is key to maintaining good mental health. So, some of the ways that people can be encouraged to better manage their stress includes:

- Try to take some time out and do things that you enjoy – even five minutes of ‘putting the whir in our heads down’ is beneficial
- Keep in touch with family, friends and neighbours – social connectedness is important
- Reflect on the good stuff – it is easy to fall into the negative in tough times but looking for the good creates balance in our thoughts and actions
- Eat well, sleep well and only use alcohol in moderation – you can’t run on an empty tank.

## **2. Support good decision-making**

A number of physical and emotional signs and symptoms of stress can impact wellbeing, concentration, motivation and ultimately decision-making ability. Understandably, when a person’s behaviour is being compromised in this manner it is hard to focus on making effective personal and professional decisions.

This becomes particularly problematic in the agricultural industry given the high levels of uncertainty, the need for agility and the ability to make complex decisions associated with agricultural production enterprises. If someone is overstressed or suffering from a period of poor mental health, they have a limited ability to handle complex information; are more likely to make reactionary choices with less information; undertake higher risk options; or make no more decisions, which is still a decision. This type of compromised decision-making can have financial and long-term impacts on both the farming business and the consultant’s business, so supporting effective and

informed decision-making is critical. Five key ways to support clients in effective decision-making include:

- Prioritise decisions – depending on the size, impact and consequences and tackling one at a time
- Know your timeframe – understand the level of urgency for a decision to be made
- Consider options – laying out the cost, benefits and impacts of different options to make an informed decision
- Identify and utilise support network – utilise skills and technological knowledge of supports and professionals to assist
- Evaluate, reassess and adapt.

### **3. Notice changes in clients, have the conversation and encourage help**

**Notice the change** - Sometimes being trusted, independent and reliable, consultants and agricultural service providers are often ideally located to notice a farmer's mental health in decline. Particularly when consultants visit clients regularly over a period of time. Some of the signs and symptoms that someone is struggling with their mental health include:

- Changes in mood or behaviour – e.g. low or flat mood or uncharacteristic anger or irritability
- Social withdrawal
- Feelings of panic, nervousness, being “on-edge”, hopelessness and lack of interest in the future – showing signs or making statements to this effect
- Difficulty with usual tasks or activities – trouble concentrating, loss of interest, confidence, or motivation
- Effects on relationships – e.g. family breakdown or arguments
- Loss of interest in usually enjoyable things – e.g. hobbies, social occasions, events
- Low energy levels and unusual physical complaints (e.g. aches and pains)
- Changes in sleeping patterns and appetite
- Changing use of drugs or alcohol – generally increased or becoming more dependant.

A person doesn't have to be exhibiting all of these symptoms, but trust your instincts.

**Have the conversation** – While it can seem uncomfortable, checking on how someone is travelling and encouraging them to get help is just a conversation, and that's something we do every day. When having a conversation, make sure you have sufficient time, chat to the person in a comfortable place about what you have noticed and why you are concerned. You do not need to fix their problems but listen to their concerns and reassure the person that there is help available. Often just providing an opportunity for the person's concerns to be listened to can be of more value than you realise.

Some examples of ways to start this conversation include:

- “I haven't seen you around much lately... what's been happening?”
- “You look a bit run down, how are you going?”
- “I've noticed...”

**Encourage help** - If the person is not travelling well, then encourage them to act. There are many different types of help but a GP (General Practitioner) is a great first point of call. They can provide treatment options or a referral to another provider through a Mental Health Treatment Plan. There are also specialised clinicians (counsellor, psychologist & social workers); phone and online resources (Beyond Blue, Black Dog Institute, etc.); the NSW Mental Health Line - 1800 011 511; or for

emergencies the Emergency Services (000). Help to source appropriate resources and services can also be gained through your local RAMHP Coordinator, [www.ramhp.com.au](http://www.ramhp.com.au) and [www.yougotthismate.com.au](http://www.yougotthismate.com.au) .

#### **4. Looking after yourself**

Supporting others can take its toll on you so it is important to look after yourself as well. You can:

- Debrief and reach out for support – utilise personal and professional networks to debrief after a difficult conversation or situation. In some workplaces, Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) are available to provide confidential support
- Do things you enjoy, be mindful, take some time out
- Eat well, sleep well and use alcohol in moderation
- Be active – physically, mentally, socially
- Set goals
- Practise gratitude and looking at the positives.

By understanding the impacts of stress in clients and ourselves we can employ stress management strategies, good decision-making practices, have conversations and look after ourselves to support our sector's resilience, maintain our profitability and be ready to jump when seasons turn.

#### **Acknowledgements**

The work is undertaken as part of the Rural Adversity Mental Health Program, a collaboration between the Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health and NSW Health.

#### **References**

Austin, E.K, Handley, T, Kiem, A.S., Rich, J.L., Askland, H.A., Askarimarnani, S.S, Perkins, D.A. & Kelly, B.J. Drought-related stress among farmers: findings from the Australian Rural Mental Health Study. The Medical Journal of Australia 2018; 209 (4): 159-165. doi: 10.5694/mja17.01200

#### **Contact details**

RAMHP – Rural Adversity Mental Health Program

Letitia Cross

Mb: 0477 343 628

Email: [Letitia.Cross@health.nsw.gov.au](mailto:Letitia.Cross@health.nsw.gov.au)

Camilla Herbig

Mb: 0419 266 493

Email: [Camilla.Herbig@health.nsw.gov.au](mailto:Camilla.Herbig@health.nsw.gov.au)